

Ann Arbor News Citizen of the Year Finalist: Sue Schooner directs Girls Group

by Jo Mathis | The Ann Arbor News Sunday February 08, 2009



Arbor News Citizen of the Year finalist Sue Schooner, center, surrounded by members of the Girl's Group Wednesday afternoon at her Ann Arbor home. The girls in the group are, clockwise from bottom: Alexia Burton, 17, Shala Blackmon, 17, Asia Van Horn-Lee, 16, Ayona Van Horn-Lee, 16, Keanna Parks, 15, Naesha Carter, 17, and Asha Evans, 16.

Sue Schooner

Age: 50

Residence: Ann Arbor

Occupation: Retired automotive executive (Chrysler, Textron Automotive, Schooner Sneider & Associates).

Education: Bachelor's degree in accounting from Ithaca College, master's degree in business administration from Harvard.

Community Service: Executive director of Girls Group, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping high school girls achieve emotional and economic security through expanded educational and professional opportunities.

Sue Schooner never had any intention of retiring from her job as an automotive executive. Certainly not at the age of 48. But the Ann Arbor resident had no idea how emotionally invested she would become in the 30 local girls she's been mentoring for nearly six years.

"It's pretty much the most amazing thing I've ever done in my life," said Schooner, the unpaid executive director of Girls Group. "The girls are just amazing. For somebody like me who never had my own kids and never interacted with kids, it puts a lot of love and awareness and energy into my life."

Shortly after Schooner moved to Ann Arbor in 2003 and decided to get involved in community service, she checked out Peace Neighborhood Center and The Women's Center of Southeastern Michigan in Ann Arbor. Each had a program for young women she believed would have more potential if combined.

Girls Group was born. The 30 girls in the group meet weekly with Schooner and other mentors to learn skills that enhance their self-confidence, leadership abilities, social consciousness and sense of self-worth. Girls are encouraged to stay in school, avoid pregnancy and substance abuse and plan for college and future success.

Alexia Burton, 17, a senior at Belleville High School, watched her GPA increase from 1.5 in ninth grade to 3.7 today. Next year, she'll attend Spelman College in Atlanta and credits her motivation to Schooner and the other mentors. "Sue really cares about us and goes out of her way to help us," said Burton, who appreciates all the help with college preparation. "I look forward to going to Girls Group every week. It's a place I can wind down, be with my peers, Sue and other mentors."

Schooner retired from her job after the first two years with Girls Group, when she realized she was spending so much time working just to keep the group funded. She figured if it was incorporated, it could fund itself, and she could retire to devote more time to the girls.

Girls Group's annual budget of \$70,000 is funded by four grants, an annual appeal letter and an annual fundraiser. It covers payroll for two part-time staffers, activities for the girls, summer camps, books, and college prep programs.

Schooner said the girls have forced her to look at the world differently and opened her eyes to both the challenges some girls face, and their huge potential.

"They're always creative and energetic, so they have me thinking about something different all the time," she said. "It's made my life fuller, and it's made me wise and more aware of what's going on in the world."

Na'Esha Carter, a senior at Pioneer and Ann Arbor Academy, called Schooner "a loving, kind person. "If she was a relative, she'd be the aunt where you love to go to her house because she gives you what you want, but also tells you what life is like and prepares you for it. She does a great job, and she knows what she's doing."